

NEWS MENU

MERSHON NEWS

EXPERTS LIST

FACT SHEET

SOCIOLOGIST STUDIES MASS MURDER TO PREDICT, PREVENT GENOCIDE



Published: 01 October 2014

Hollie Nyseth Brehm, assistant professor, sociology, is the lead author of a new study finding that perpetrators of the genocide in Rwanda were most likely to be males in their mid-30a.



"We were surprised that perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda were, on average, 34 years old," said Brehm. "Much research in criminology would point toward much younger participants — late adolescence and early 20s — in most any form of crime."

While working with Rwanda's national genocide prevention commission, Brehm obtained access to the country's court records. Those records hold information about who participated in the genocide. Working with colleagues Christopher Uggen at the University of Minnesota and Jean-Damascene Gasanabo in Rwanda — the only team in the world with access to these data — Brehm analyzed almost 2 million Rwandan convictions.

In studying the genocide, Brehm and her team found that men between the ages of 18 and 45 were responsible for 75 percent of the Rwandan atrocities, representing a demographic slice that does not reflect the age or gender distribution of Rwanda's larger population.

Brehm and her colleagues suggest that this subpopulation might be more likely to commit genocide because, in contrast to traditional explanations of age and crime that emphasize aging out of crime, "perpetrators often believe they are acting to protect their family or nation from outsiders who are dangerous or even subhuman." Furthermore, the "violence has been framed as 'work,' which has age-graded overtones and a clear link to adult role behavior."

The full study, "Age, Sex and the Crime of Genocide," is under review for publication, though Brehm has presented its results at national and international conferences.

Going forward, Brehm plans to use these data to better understand other elements of the genocide as well as transitional justice in Rwanda.

Brehm's research focuses on the fundamental questions of why and how atrocities occur and who commits them. She is equally interested in the process of transitional justice after atrocities, including how societies rebuild, how international actors respond to the violence, and the lasting effects of mass violence.


"Although countries have continually vowed to prevent genocide and mass violence, pictures of piles of bodies, endless rows of faces behind barbed wire, and starving children in refugee camps fill news media around the world and remind us that genocides continue to occur with alarming frequency," said Brehm "This violence has often appeared to be incomprehensible, chaotic or even psychopathic. Yet, like other social processes, genocide is structural and systematic. Although each genocide is unique, there are also discernible patterns among genocides, much like civil wars, hate crimes or terrorism."

Brehm emphasizes that there is much more work to be done to fully understand genocide's risk factors. "We are hopeful," she said, "that learning more about who commits genocide may be useful in targeted interventions."

As a PhD student, Brehm studied genocide in Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Darfur, focusing on factors that influence community-level rates of genocide, which involved case-study interviews in each country.

Brehm is an affiliate of the Mershon Center for International Security Studies and the Criminal Justice Research Center. She is a volunteer with the Center for Victims of Torture, a Core Member of I-Activism and a school board consultant.

Mershon Center	Arts and Sciences	International Affairs	Resources
About Us	College of Arts and Sciences	Office of International Affairs	Events Calendar
Research	Academics	Center for African Studies	E-Newsletters
News	About the College	Center for Latin American Studies	Annual Reports
Events	News and Events	Center for Slavic & East European Studies	Fact Sheet
Grants	Research	East Asian Studies Center	Experts List
People	Arts and Culture	Institute for Chinese Studies	Faculty Books
Publications	Alumni	Institute for Japanese Studies	Furniss Award
Contact		Institute for Korean Studies	Knowledge Bank
		Middle East Studies Center	



The Ohio State University

© 2013 Mershon Center for International Security Studies – College of Arts and Sciences

1501 Neil Ave., Columbus, OH 43201

Phone: 614-292-1681 | Fax: 614-292-2407

[Request an alternate format of this page.](#)

